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Father Cantalamessa on the Right to Convert

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, MARCH 9, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of a commentary by the Pontifical Household preacher, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, on the readings from this Sunday's liturgy.

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Jesus the Preacher

Third Sunday of Lent

Exodus 3:1-8a,13-15; 1 Corinthians 10:1-6,10,12; Luke 13:1-9

The Gospel for the Third Sunday of Lent offers us an example of Jesus' preaching. He takes his cue from some recent news (Pontius Pilate's execution of some Galileans and the death of twelve persons in the collapse of a tower) to speak about the necessity of vigilance and conversion.

In accord with his style he reinforces his teaching with a parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard..." Following the program that we have set out for this Lent, we will move from this passage to look at the whole of Jesus' preaching, trying to understand what it tells us about the problem of who Jesus was.

Jesus began his preaching with a solemn declaration: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15). We are used to the sound of these words and we no longer perceive their novelty and revolutionary character. With them, Jesus came to say that the time of waiting is over; the moment of the decisive intervention of God in human history, which was announced by the prophets, is here; now is the time! Now everything is decided, and it will be decided according to the position that people take when they are confronted with my words.

This sense of fulfillment, of a goal finally reached, can be perceived in different sayings of Jesus, whose historical authenticity cannot be doubted. One day, taking his disciples aside, he says: "Blessed are the eyes which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear and did not hear it" (Luke 10:23-24).

In the sermon on the mount Jesus said among other things: "You have heard that it was said (by Moses!) ... but I say to you." The impression that these words of Christ had on his contemporaries must have been fairly uniform. Such claims leave us few options for explanation: Either the person was crazy or simply spoke the truth. A lunatic, however, would not have lived and died as he did, and would not have continued to have such an impact on humanity 20 centuries after his death.

The novelty of the person and preaching of Jesus comes clearly to light when compared to John the Baptist. John always spoke of something in the future, a judgment that was going to take place; Jesus speaks of something that is present, a kingdom that has come and is at work. John is the man of "not yet"; Jesus is the man of "already."

Jesus says: "Among those born of woman there is none greater than John and yet the littlest one of the kingdom of God is greater than him" (Luke 7:28); and again: "The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached and everyone enters it violently" (Luke 16:16). These words tell us that between the mission of John and Jesus there is a qualitative leap: The littlest one in the new order is in a better position than the greatest one of the old order.

This is what brought the disciples of Bultmann (Bornkamm, Konzelmann, et al.) to break with their master, putting the great parting of the waters between the old and the new, between Judaism and Christianity, in the life and preaching of Christ and not in the post-Easter faith of the Church.

Here we see how historically indefensible is the thesis of those who want to enclose Jesus in the world of the Judaism of his time, making him a Jew just like the others, one who did not intend to make a break with the past or to bring anything substantially new. This would be to set back the historical research on Jesus to a stage that we left behind quite some time ago.

Let us go back, as we usually do, to this Sunday's Gospel passage to glean some practical guidance. Jesus comments on Pilate's butchery and the collapse of the tower thus: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." We deduce a very important lesson from this. Such disasters are not, as some think, divine castigation of the victims; if anything, they are an admonition for others.

This is an indispensable interpretive key which allows us to see that we should not lose faith when we are confronted with the terrible events that occur every day, often among the poorest and most defenseless. Jesus helps us to understand how we should react when the evening news reports earthquakes, floods, and slaughters like that ordered by Pilate. Sterile reactions like, "Oh those poor people!" are not what is called for.

Faced with these things we should reflect on the precariousness of life, on the necessity of being vigilant and of not being overly attached to that which we might easily lose one day or the next.

The word with which Jesus begins his preaching resounds in this Gospel passage: conversion. I would like to point out, however, that conversion is not only a duty, it is also a possibility for all, almost a right. It is good and not bad news! No one is excluded from the possibility of changing. No one can be regarded as hopeless. In life there are moral situations that seem to have no way out. Divorced people who are remarried; unmarried couples with children; heavy criminal sentences ... every sort of bad situation.

Even for these people there is the possibility of change. When Jesus said that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven, the apostles asked: "But who can be saved?" Jesus' answer applies even to the cases I have mentioned: "For men it is impossible, but not for God."

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